

Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Miracle of the Loaves

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In last week's Gospel we read of the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Today Jesus complains that the crowd did not understand what he had done. They had failed to grasp what Jesus was trying to show them--they did not understand that the miracle of the loaves and fishes was a sign, a teaching. "You are not looking for me because you have seen signs, but because you have eaten your fill of the loaves." Well, what was Jesus trying to show?

Our understanding of the miracle is going to depend in part on just what we think the miracle was. As you may recall from previous homilies over the years, (you do remember my homilies right--I am sure glad I have them written down) I like to think of the multiplication of the loaves not so much in terms of bread appearing out of thin air to a bunch of helpless people who did not think ahead, but of people, many of whom had had put some bread in their cloaks being inspired by the example of a young boy who volunteered his bread and fish to share what they did have with those around them as well.

Now I have heard this reading disparaged as the "brown bag" interpretation, and dismissed as explaining away the miraculous from what Jesus had done. But miracle comes from the Latin miraculo, the word for wonder. A miracle is a religious wonder, a sign, as Jesus puts it, some event that exceeds our normal expectations of how things work in the "real" world, snaps our head around and draws our thoughts and feelings towards God. The real wonder here, was not just the sudden abundance of bread, but what that miracle was a sign of...not a full stomach, which will soon become hungry again, but of Jesus' teaching creating generous hearts, open hearts to last a lifetime. As Jesus says in regards to another miracle disparaged by cynics: "what is harder to do, to say "your sins are forgiven" or "get up and walk"? Doctors can save lives by healing bodies, but God saves by healing hearts.

In fact the miracle is even greater than simply people sharing the bread they brought for themselves. I mean, can you really blame those who hid their bread in their cloaks? By one account there were five thousand hungry people

out there in the wilderness who had spent the whole day spellbound by Jesus teaching. If I had been there, and had had the foresight to bring something to eat along with me, I would be afraid to take it out at all, for fear of being pestered by everyone around me for a piece, and for fear of angering them if I did not share, to the point that I and everyone else would be left with only a scrap or two. And after all as Andrew had said about the boy's offering of the five loaves and two fish, "What good is that for so many?"

So under the brown bag interpretation the miracle is not even that people shared their bread with those in need around them, but that they were not overwhelmed by the dimensions of that need, that Jesus had inspired within them the faith to believe that what little they did have to share would make any difference. So perhaps the true miracle is that when only one naive young kid speaks up when the apostles asks for food to distribute, Jesus does not throw up his hands, but tells his disciples to begin passing around this ridiculously little bit of food. Then those who already had food may have felt shamed enough to say "None for me, I've got some here I forgot about--or "Oh. Was that what Jesus was asking? I couldn't quite hear what he said. I thought he said blessed are the cheesemakers. But bread, I've got a little bread here." Once Jesus started the ball rolling, people could feel free to eat what they already had and even share some without fear that they would get mobbed. And so those five loaves and two fish managed to be enough for that whole crowd and when the disciples collected the leftover scraps they ended up with more than they started with.

On this reading, the miracle of the loaves, like any other miracle, is about the miraculous power of faith--to make possible what is impossible in the "real" world. For as Jesus repeats over and over, "nothing is impossible with God". Its about faith the size of a mustard seed leading to a bush big enough for the birds of the air to make a home. A faith that can move mountains.

You could even say that the faith that starts the ball rolling is not the crowd's own faith, but Jesus' faith in the crowds that once shown such seemingly pointless generosity, people would step up and turn what was impossible into reality and turn the "real" world into the Kingdom of God, at least for a moment.

On this reading, we too can accomplish miracles-- if we have enough faith in ourselves that the little we can do matters, which means also having faith

enough in others, that they really do want to help too, they're just afraid, or don't know how; which means having faith enough in God that he created children that do want to be kind and generous.

Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, whose feast we celebrated this past week, wrote a prayer my mom had us pray after supper every evening for years as I was growing up. I did not learn it was written by Ignatius until after I had already joined the Jesuits, but I like to think its spirituality formed and shaped me into a Jesuit way of life unawares.

Lord teach me to be generous
to give and not count the cost
to work and not expect rewards
to labor and not ask for rest
to love as you have loved.